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FAITH SHARING III: Using Words, Deeds, and Signs

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Romans 15:18-19

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“I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me in leading the Gentiles to obey God by what I have said and done-- by the power of signs and miracles, through the power of the Spirit. So from Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum (Yugoslavia/Albania), I have fully proclaimed the gospel of Christ.”

The past two weeks we've looked at Christian faith and why we share faith. First, we share because faith sharing is God's idea. From Genesis to Revelation, the Bible is a missionary book about a missionary God whose will it is to call and create a missionary people. Salvation is God's idea! It began as God's quest. Pull out your bulletin and write again the names of the 5 people in your life that God wants you to share faith with. As we talk today, I want you to have those names, those faces, and their issues in your mind.

Second, we share faith because people need the Lord. People need Christian faith. Humanity exists in broken relationship with God, each other, and even within ourselves. That broken relationship is what we call sin. Sin destroys life. We are sadly witnessing the reality of sin, and the lives ruined because of it. We must share faith because of the seriousness of sin and human need. We also share faith because of human worth. We've been created in God's image and pronounced very good. People need to hear that! Our motive is love – God's love. We love others because God first loved us.

As we share faith, we need to be clear. Our Christian faith is centered on the living God revealed in Jesus Christ. It's personal because it is centered on the person of Jesus Christ. It's also personal because it requires a personal response from each person. Christian faith is also relational because it properly relates us to God, each other, and ourselves. Look again at those names... Imagine their lives being fed by prayer, God's Word the Bible, and growing spiritually... Can you see how the world could be changed, through them?

With those 5 in mind, Let us look into the “sharing” half of “faith sharing.” Why do we freak out when we think of sharing our faith? Because we can't convert people. But neither could Paul.

Paul wrote many letters that make up the New Testament today. Paul started many small groups and house churches where none had previously existed. And after years of ministry Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome. After a lifetime of adventures and exploits, “*I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me in leading the Gentiles to obey God by what I have said and done-- by the power of signs and miracles, through the power of the Spirit.*” Do you see? Paul couldn't convert anyone. I can't convert anyone. You can't convert anyone. So relax! It's not about you! You don't even have to be Superman or Wonder Woman! When a life is changed, it's only because of what Christ has accomplished through you, through the power of His Holy Spirit.

You cannot evangelize people. (whew!) That's such a relief, tell your neighbor – You cannot evangelize people. The word evangelism means nothing more than “good message.” (Ev = Eu = good, like euphoria. Angel = angel or message.) You and I can only evangelize the Gospel. We simply faithfully share about

God. God, then, is the one who converts people. His Holy Spirit in you connects with the person's spirit, opening them up to receive His Holy Spirit for their own.

Obviously, the goal of faith sharing is that people would respond to God's invitation and enter into relationship with God, through Jesus Christ. But don't confuse the goal of conversion with the definition of evangelism. Go back to our 5 names. We have no control over them. The only failure we ought to fear is that of failing to spread the Gospel of Christ's kingdom. Our primary responsibility is to take the initiative to share Christ with others, and leave the results up to God.

The core of faith sharing is in faithfully presenting the good news of the kingdom of God in word, deed, and sign. Listen again In Romans 15:18-19, Paul summarizes this point: *"I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me in leading the Gentiles to obey God by what I have said and done-- by the power of signs and miracles, through the power of the Spirit. So from Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum (Yugoslavia/Albania), I have fully proclaimed the gospel of Christ."* Let us look at faith sharing by word, deed, and sign.

First (and second), word and deed. The Gospel must be made both visible and verbal. In the Bible, word and deed are not separated. In creation God spoke and creation happened. With Jesus, his words ring true to his lifestyle and his life supports his words. In the early church this holistic approach is the same: most often the early Christians proclaimed Christ in the midst of helping those who were in trouble, sick people, elderly, and orphaned, in the midst of hostile authority, in the midst of oppressive systems of the world.

Word and deed: Which is more important? Neither. That would be like asking which is more important, breathing in or breathing out? It depends on which was done last! Jesus called us to offer the cup of cold water in his name. If we only name the name, we are dismissed as irrelevant. If we only offer the water, we are quenching physical thirst but leaving spiritual thirst unsatisfied.

As a church, and as individuals, we have got to practice both. How do you make your words and deeds count? Listen first. Don't go around shoving your own problems, issues, and life in people's faces. Look at your list of 5 names. Listen to them, and ask probing questions: How *is* your life? How is it going, *really*? Identify their struggles. Really listen, because when you get down to the baseline of every issue, there is brokenness there. There is sin there. For every issue, God's got an answer. Jesus gives courage to face it, power to begin changing, and hope that one day – whether in this life or in eternity, the struggle will be put to rest. This summer, whose house will you visit? Plan to stay up late and get to some real issues with them. Just last week I was talking with one of the trainers at the gym, asking about his future career and plans. And he told me his plans and then ended by saying "whatever God wants." My antenna went up! What a great, non-threatening way to bring God into the equation! Could you throw that into your conversation with old friends, or family, or coworkers this summer? That's using words and deeds.

Paul also gives us another way to share Christian faith: in signs. I'm not necessarily talking about televangelists slaying people in the aisles. Signs can be trivialized and misused, just like everything else in the world. But signs are a reality. In the Bible, signs and wonders validate both the messenger and the message. Whatever gives significance to Christ is a sign. It could be great art or great music. Signs pointing people to God could be a great marriage, church structures, dance, poetry, especially the signs of the bread and cup in communion. Forgiveness is a sign. A sign could be as simple as choosing to do the right thing in the face of a convenient way out. For some people, just stopping by their house for a visit is a sign of God's love and care. Words, deeds, and signs: Authentic faith sharing needs all three. And then we wait and work in humility and hope, and remember that God is faithful.

Let me close with the story of a nobody named Kimball. Edward Kimball was concerned about one of his young Sunday school students who worked at a shoe store in town. One day Kimball visited him at the store, found the student back stocking shoes, and led him to Christ then and there. Dwight L. Moody eventually left the shoe store to become one of the greatest preachers and evangelists of all time.

Moody preached in a little chapel in the British Isles pastored by a young man with the imposing name of Fredric Brotherton Meyer. In his sermon, Moody told an emotionally charged story about a Sunday school teacher he had known in Chicago who personally went to every student in his class and led every one of them to Christ.

That message changed Pastor Meyer's entire ministry, inspiring him to become a faith sharer like Moody. Over the years Meyer came to America several times to preach. Once, in Northfield Massachusetts, a confused young preacher sitting in the back row heard Meyer say, "If you are not willing to give up everything for Christ, are you willing to be made willing?" That remark led J. Wilbur Chapman to respond to the call of God on his life.

Chapman went on to become one of the most effective evangelists of his time. A volunteer by the name of Billy Sunday helped set up his crusades and learned how to preach by watching Chapman. Billy Sunday eventually took over Chapman's ministry, becoming one of the most dynamic preachers of the 20th century.

Inspired by a 1924 Billy Sunday crusade in Charlotte, NC, a committee of Christians there dedicated themselves to reaching that city for Christ. The committee invited the evangelist Mordecai Ham to hold a series of faith sharing meetings in 1932. A lanky 16 year-old sat in the huge crowd one evening, spellbound by the message of the white-haired man, who seemed to be speaking and waving his lone finger at him. Night after night the teenager attended and finally went forward to give his life to Christ.

The teenager's name? Billy Graham – the man who has undoubtedly communicated the gospel of Jesus Christ to more people than any other man in history. Remember how it began? A "nobody" named Kimball was concerned for one of his students. In that deed of visiting a shoe store, he changed the world for Christ.

Can anything like that happen today? You bet it can - when you and I take the time...to share our faith.